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ABSTRACT

A study investigated one aspect of the speech/reading comprehension relationship--that between the ability to select the correct standard English verbal endings (-s and -ed) and the ability to recognize the tense of a passage when time information was encoded primarily in the verbs and adverbs. Subjects were 135 third, sixth, and ninth grade students, who had been rated as either black English vernacular (BEV) or standard English (SE) speakers on the basis of a sentence repetition task. The students were first asked to complete passages that had been clozed for content words and verbs in the past and present tenses. In a second task, the student supplied time adverbials for 15 short paragraphs written in the past, present, or future tenses. On the cloze task, BEV speakers had significantly more errors for verbs than for content words when compared to SE speakers. They also had significantly more errors in selecting the appropriate time adverbial on the basis of tense. These findings were attributed to differences that exist in the verbal systems of SE and BEV.

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CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF READING

Technical Report No. 199

BLACK ENGLISH VERNACULAR AND READING
COMPREHENSION: A CLOZE STUDY
OF THIRD, SIXTH, AND NINTH GRADERS

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Abstract

This study was concerned with the reading comprehension of speakers of Black English Vernacular (BEV). Third, sixth, and ninth graders were rated as BEV or Standard English (SE) speakers using a sentence repetition task. They were then asked to complete passages which had been clozed for content words and verbs in the past and present tenses. This task used a multiple-choice format: Verb distractors were other forms of the clozed verb; content word distractors were words that were anomalous in that context. In a second task, subjects supplied time adverbials for 15 short paragraphs written in the past, present, or future tenses. On the cloze task, BEV speakers had significantly more errors for verbs than for content words compared to SE speakers. They also had significantly more errors in selecting the appropriate time adverbial on the basis of tense. These findings can be attributed to differences that exist in the verbal systems of SE and BEV.

Black English Vernacular and Reading Comprehension:

A Cloze Study of Third, Sixth and Ninth Graders

In an effort to identify possible reasons for the educational failure of many black inner-city children, a considerable amount of research has focused on the relationship between competence in Black English Vernacular (BEV) and reading performance. The results of these studies have been contradictory, in part because of the varying research perspectives and methods used. The lack of agreement on the effect of BEV has resulted in divergent educational strategies¹ which in many cases have put educators at cross purposes. Recently, speakers of BEV have seized the initiative in the debate about the relationship between their language and educational outcomes, and they have undertaken litigation to make the schools more responsive to the unique set of characteristics that they bring to the educational process (Martin Luther King, Jr. Elementary School Children v. Ann Arbor District Board, 1979).

The issue of language variation was first pushed into national consciousness by claims that the speech of black inner-city children was substandard and so deficient a code that both communication and cognition were negatively affected--"the deficit hypothesis" (Bereiter & Engelmann, 1966; Deutsch, 1965; Hess & Shipman, 1965). This prompted a strong response from sociolinguists who, on theoretical grounds and on the basis of in-depth analyses, argued for the adequacy of the dialect (Bailey, 1969; Dillard, 1967; Labov, 1972). They investigated such

facets of BEV as the variable use of the past tense marker -ed, the third person singular present tense marker -s, and the copular system, and contrasted these features with those of the standard dialect (Fasold, 1972; Labov, 1969; Wolfram, 1969). Many of these researchers also claimed that the language of black inner-city children is different enough from the language of middle-class teachers to be a major source of educational problems--"the difference hypothesis" (Baratz, 1969b; Stewart, 1969; Wolfram & Fasold, 1974).

The experimental research that has been motivated by this hypothesis has yielded conflicting results. When experimental subjects were BEV speakers and poor readers were not excluded, an interaction between dialect and reading performance was found (Harber, 1977; Labov, 1972). In other studies, there was no effect of language on reading comprehension. Some of these contradictory results are attributable to problems in experimental design. For example, one group of studies neglected to test subjects' dialect and simply assumed that their black subjects were speakers of BEV. In some of these studies, there was evidence of language interference in reading (Johnson, 1971; Mizelle, 1972), while in others there was none (Nolen, 1972; Schaaf, 1971). These results may reflect the presence or absence of BEV speakers in the experimental population. Clearly, SE speakers who happened to be black would not provide evidence on the BEV issue. In one study that did test for dialect, no effects on comprehension were found. However, subjects showed only a low frequency

of features and presumably did not speak a heavy variety of BEV (Melmed, 1971).

Related design problems included dropping black children who were not good readers from the subject population and comparing older black children with younger white children in order to control for reading ability level (Hall & Turner, 1974). Such strategies biased the experiments against the interference hypothesis by excluding those black children most likely to show its effects.

Another such biased research strategy involved analyzing the difficulty black and white children had in reading SE and BEV texts after several years of SE reading instruction and assessing their comprehension (Jaggar, 1971). As Mathewson (1974) has argued, there is little likelihood that either SE or BEV speakers will find BEV easier to read than the code in which they have already been trained.

The present study was directed to a very specific speech/reading comprehension relationship--the one between the ability to select the correct SE verbal endings (-s and -ed) and the ability to recognize the time of a passage when time information is encoded primarily in the verbal system. There were several reasons for this choice. First, the -s and -ed inflections have been the subject of intense linguistic analysis and a great deal is known about their distribution in BEV. Second, they have been used in reading research (e.g., Labov, 1972; Melmed, 1971), and there is a body of contradictory claims about their effect. In such a situation, an additional study often provides support

for one of the arguments or helps to clarify the source of the apparent contradiction. Third, by studying the verbal inflections, it is possible to look at a very close relationship involving the covariation of form and function, i.e., the realization of tense and the identification of time. In no other case is this relationship so direct. It was expected that such a strategy would provide information on whether the effect of BEV on reading can be more exactly defined, with the resulting possibility of more effective educational strategies.

In the present study, subjects' ability to use both BEV and SE was determined with a version of the Baratz Sentence Repetition Test (Baratz, 1969a). This test is based on the phenomenon that when a person is asked to repeat a sentence in a dialect she/he does not speak spontaneously, that sentence will usually be produced in his/her own dialect. At best, only a limited number of the features of the target dialect will be repeated. Thus, for a monolingual SE speaker, there is a strong tendency for a BEV sentence such as the following:

I aks Tom do he wanna go to the picture that be playing at the movies,

to be rendered as its SE equivalent:

I asked Tom if he wanted to go to the picture that was playing at the movies.

Once SE and BEV populations were identified, it was possible to address two questions that relate directly to the effect of dialect differences on reading comprehension. The first involved the use of a

multiple-choice cloze format. Of interest was whether BEV and SE speaking groups would differ in selecting the correct verbal inflections and in selecting the appropriate content words from lists of alternatives consisting of the three other forms of the verb or three semantically anomalous choices from the same word class, respectively. In other words, the issue was whether BEV speakers would find the second choice in the following example more difficult than the first:

The 5 slammed into a pole and 6 off.

5. country
moon
fish
car

6. bounced
bouncing
bounce
bounces

A number of characteristics of BEV lead to the prediction that the verb choice would be relatively more difficult for the BEV speaker than the content word choice. First, the use of the past tense -ed inflection is variable in BEV. Whether or not it occurs is affected by the level of formality of the speech situation, with a greater occurrence of the form in more formal situations. Characteristics of the sentence being produced also affect the appearance of the past tense ending. For example, if the word following the verb begins with a vowel, there will be a greater occurrence of the -ed form than if the word begins with a consonant (Fasold, 1972). A second BEV characteristic affecting this task is the distribution of the third person singular present tense marker, as in The man talks. For some BEV speakers, the verbal -s is rarely present, regardless of level of formality, while for others it

may occur variably. Because both the inflected past tense (talked) and the inflected third-person present tense forms (talks) vary with the noninflected verb (talk), it was predicted that BEV speakers would find choosing the correct inflectional forms a more difficult task than would SE speakers.

It should be noted that the content words and their semantically anomalous distractors provided an independent measure of reading competence. Similar scores on the content word component for both SE and BEV speakers would suggest that differential performance on the verb component by BEV speakers should be attributed to dialect difference rather than to a lower level of reading ability. On the basis of national reading achievement scores, it would be reasonable to assume that SE subjects would score higher on the content word component than would BEV subjects, but it was expected that this difference would be less than that for the verb component.

A second question addressed in the study was whether greater difficulty in the selection of the correct verb form had any implications for reading comprehension. Given a higher error rate for BEV speakers in selecting the SE verb forms, it could be claimed that this was a production problem. Such a claim would indicate that the BEV reader is aware of the tense of a given verb and is able to sort out the time relationships in the passage at a receptive level, but has difficulty at the production level in selecting the correct SE form. To test such

a claim, short paragraphs were developed in which the time of the event was indicated principally by the verbal inflection of regular verbs. There were no time adverbials which would indicate past, future, or habitual activity, nor were there any irregular verbs (run-ran; is-was; go-went), because these verbs have realizations in BEV that correspond to their SE forms. Asking subjects to select the appropriate time adverbial for these paragraphs would provide some evidence bearing on the question of whether inability to select the correct SE verbal inflection involves a comprehension problem as well.

In summary, it was predicted that BEV speakers would have relatively more difficulty with verbal inflections than with content words, and that this would be reflected in greater confusion over the time of passages when that information was encoded primarily in the verbal inflections.

Method

Subjects

The subjects were white and black third, sixth, and ninth graders living in a midwestern city. Each subject was tested individually for dialect using a version of the Baratz Sentence Repetition Test (Baratz, 1969a) and was rated as a BEV or SE speaker. Fifteen BEV and 38 SE third graders, 19 BEV and 26 SE sixth graders, and nine BEV and 28 SE ninth graders participated in the experiment.

Materials

Baratz Sentence Repetition Test. Dialect competence was assessed individually using a sentence repetition procedure. The stimulus was a tape recording of eight sentence pairs in BEV and SE spoken by a bi-dialectal speaker. In each of 16 trials, subjects listened to a sentence, then repeated it during the pause provided. Two to six SE or BEV features in each sentence were scored. Subjects were considered SE speakers if their scores on the SE features were more than ten percentage points higher than those for the BEV features. They were rated as BEV speakers if their scores on the BEV features were higher than or within ten percentage points of their SE scores.

Cloze test. Three passages were clozed. Two were chosen from the SRA series, We Are Black Kit (1969). This collection was used because school librarians report that the stories are popular with elementary school children. An effort was made to select texts that did not have obvious black cultural content. One of these passages, which was in the past tense, was first-grade level according to the Fry (1972) readability formula (Passage E1). The other, which was longer and included verbs in both the past tense and present tense, was sixth-grade level (Passage H). A third passage, written by the first author, was in the present tense with a second-grade readability level (Passage E2).

The passages were clozed according to the rules given in SPPED Cloze Exercises in a Multiple Choice Cloze Format (1975). The first deletion fell between the sixth and fourteenth word of the passage. Because of the restrictions on the words to be clozed, it was impossible to delete every fifth word. A minimum of three words and a maximum of ten were left between deletions. In both E1 and E2, there were 12 verbs. In the sixth-grade-level passage, 23 verbs were deleted. Enough content words were clozed to satisfy spacing requirements, which in the two shorter passages resulted in 12 and 19 deletions, and in the longer passage, 21.

Three distractors were prepared for each clozed item. In the case of the verbs, the distractors were the two other inflected forms (-ing and -s, or -ed) and the uninflected form. For example, if the past tense wanted was the correct choice, the distractors were wanting, wants, and want. For the substantives, three anomalous distractors which were randomly selected from the block of 100 in which the target word occurred in the American Heritage Word Frequency List (Carroll, Davies, & Richman, 1971).

Materials were given in booklet form. Two to five lines of text appeared on each page, with numbered blanks for the words clozed. Multiple-choice items for each blank were presented on the same page below the text.

Adverbial test. Fifteen paragraphs, five each in the past, present, and future tenses, were prepared. Each contained four occurrences of regular verbs in the appropriate tense and a blank for an adverbial to be

selected from the following three: yesterday, every day, or tomorrow.

The paragraphs were between two and four sentences long.

Materials were presented in booklet form with five paragraphs on a page. Instructions and examples for this task employed irregular verbs. These were used because, as in SE, the past tense of these verbs in BEV is indicated by changes in the total word, e.g., is-was, go-went. It was felt these examples would make the task clear to both SE and BEV speakers.

Procedure

All subjects participated in three class sessions (class size approximately 28) and an individual session which was devoted to dialect assessment. In the individual session, each subject was escorted to a room where he or she listened to a tape of a bidialectal speaker reading the sentences of the Baratz Repetition Test. BEV and SE sentences were presented in random order. Subjects were told to listen carefully to the sentences, then to repeat them exactly as they heard them. The experimenter had a tally sheet with the critical features for each sentence, which were marked as "changed" or "same" as the subject repeated the sentence.

During the first class session, third graders completed one of the easy cloze passages (E1 or E2, order counterbalanced), while sixth and ninth graders did both (E1 and E2, order counterbalanced). There was no interpolated task between the two passages. During the second session,

third graders did the second easy passage while sixth and ninth graders did the difficult passage (H). During the third session, all subjects completed the adverbial test.

Instructions for the cloze task explained that words had been left out of the stories. Subjects were told to read each page and then circle the word which should go in each blank.

In the adverbial task, subjects were told to read each paragraph carefully, to "pay attention to when things happen in the little story" and to write one of three time words (tomorrow, every day, or yesterday) in the blank provided.

Results

The cloze data were analyzed in four separate analyses of variance. The first analysis involved past tense verbs and content words from passage E1. The second analysis involved present tense verbs and content words from passage E2. The third and fourth analyses involved past tense verbs, present tense verbs and content words all from passage H. These analyses were performed using grade and dialect rating as between-groups factors and item type (verbs vs. content words) as a within-subjects factor. The dependent measure in all cases was proportion of correct cloze responses.

Table 1 represents the mean proportion of correct cloze responses for all four analyses. For past tense verbs and content words from passage E1, significant effects appeared for grade, $F(2,129) = 10.34$,

$p < .01$; dialect rating, $F(1,129) = 6.19$, $p < .01$; item type, $F(1,129) = 88.81$, $p < .01$; grade x item type, $F(2,129) = 3.14$, $p < .05$; and dialect rating x item type, $F(1,129) = 8.57$, $p < .01$. No other results reached significance. For content words and present tense verbs from passage E2, significant main effects were found for grade, $F(2,129) = 6.86$, $p < .01$; dialect rating, $F(1,129) = 12.06$, $p < .01$; and item type,

 Insert Table 1 about here.

$F(1,129) = 176.9$, $p < .01$. Significant interactions were found for grade x item type, $F(2,129) = 9.66$, $p < .01$, and dialect rating x item type, $F(1,129) = 47.88$, $p < .01$. No other results reached significance.

The analysis performed on content words and past tense verbs from passage H yielded significant main effects for dialect rating, $F(1,78) = 39.85$, $p < .01$, and item type, $F(1,78) = 59.62$, $p < .01$. The dialect rating x item type interaction, $F(1,78) = 31.03$, $p < .01$, was also significant. No other results reached significance.

For content words and present tense verbs from passage H, significant results appeared for grade, $F(1,78) = 16.14$, $p < .01$; dialect rating, $F(1,78) = 10.25$, $p < .01$; item type, $F(1,78) = 65.96$, $p < .01$; and the grade x item type interaction, $F(1,78) = 5.54$, $p < .05$. The dialect rating x item interaction approached significance ($p < .10$). No other results reached significance.

For all of the preceding analyses, the grade main effects were due to better performance by the older subjects. The dialect rating result was due to better performance by the SE group than by the BEV group. The item type effect reflected subjects' superior performance on the content word as opposed to the verb cloze items. The grade x item type interaction was due to larger grade-level differences for verbs than for content words. The dialect rating x item type interaction resulted from a convergence in performance for the two language groups on content words but not verbs.

A final analysis was performed on the adverbial paragraphs using grade, dialect rating, and type of adverb as factors and mean proportion of correct cloze responses as the dependent measure. Significant main effects were found for grade, $F(2,129) = 7.08$, $p < .01$; dialect rating, $F(1,129) = 10.18$, $p < .01$; and item types $F(2,258) = 24.99$, $p < .01$. No other results reached significance. As in all previous analyses, the grade effect reflected superior performance by older subjects and the dialect rating effect reflected superior performance by the SE speakers. The item type effect resulted from the increasing difficulty subjects had dealing with the adverbs reflecting present, past, and future time (see Table 2).

Insert Table 2 about here.

Discussion

It was predicted that BEV speakers would find the structural cloze items (the verbal inflectional endings) more difficult than SE speakers would. This prediction was supported. BEV speakers' structural scores were much lower than those of SE subjects. This is undoubtedly related to the fact that in BEV the past tense can be realized by both the -ed and the zero inflection verb forms (e.g., want or wanted), and in the present tense, the -s ending, which redundantly encodes the number of the sentence subject, can also be omitted (e.g., he want or he wants). Due to the variable nature of BEV, the two structures studied--the past tense and the third person singular present tense--shared a form which does not occur in SE--the zero inflection form. This results in a loss of information about tense and number in BEV that is encoded in the main verb form in SE.

A distinction has been made in the literature between cloze procedures which tap a high percentage of structural information and those which tap a high percentage of semantic information (Kingston & Weaver, 1970; Rankin, 1974). It has been argued that the nth word (or any word) procedure focuses on the more frequently occurring words of the language, i.e., function words. These items are tightly constrained by the grammatical structure of the immediate context and thus provide an assessment of the reader's control of that aspect of the text. When the

items clozed are limited to content words--nouns, verbs, adjectivals, adverbials--their successful completion is dependent to a much greater degree upon the semantic content of the passage. In the present study, the verbal inflectional endings provide a structural assessment inasmuch as they are a closed class of frequently occurring forms that are highly constrained and predictable. The content words to a greater extent tap the comprehension of the content of the passage.

A finding which was not predicted was that SE speakers would also have more difficulty with the verbal inflectional endings than with content words. This can be attributed to the fact that the content cloze task was relatively easy because the choice was based on a semantic criterion, while in the case of the verbal inflections, the choice was a metalinguistic one. In other words, the content word choice was a function of common world knowledge which subjects possessed, while the verbal choice was a function of specialized linguistic knowledge. This resulted in a ceiling effect for performance on the content word task. However, it should be noted that in no case did the spread between content word and verb scores for SE speakers approach that for BEV speakers. The BEV speakers always found the structural items much more difficult.

The wrong choices for the two speech groups were analyzed. It was expected that the BEV group would find the uninflected form a much more

attractive distractor than would the SE group, i.e., a higher percentage of their wrong answers would be the uninflected form. In fact, this was found for the third and sixth grade in every case: E1--BEV 61% vs. SE 48%; E2--BEV 32% vs. SE 15%; H past--BEV 37% vs. SE 24%; H present--BEV 28% vs. SE 16%. In the case of the ninth graders, BEV subjects had a higher percentage of uninflected errors on the hard passage than did SE subjects for both the past and the present tense: 24% BEV vs. 19% SE, and 48% vs. 18%, respectively. This distribution seems to indicate that the presence of a correct uninflected past and present form in their dialect had an effect on the performance of BEV subjects. From the performance of the ninth graders, there is also some evidence that BEV features will more likely be introduced when the difficulty of a passage increases.

A second prediction was that BEV speakers would have more difficulty identifying the time of a short passage when this information was coded principally in the verbal inflections than SE speakers would. When information (even redundant information) is lost, the possibility of distortion of a message increases. This is exactly the situation in the verbal system for BEV speakers: Three distinct SE forms have one realization in their dialect. In this study, it was found that BEV speakers made more errors supplying the appropriate time adverbial (yesterday, every day, tomorrow) when verbal inflections provided the only structural cues for time than did SE speakers.

These findings are in accordance with those of Labov (1972-b), who developed a reading test using the homograph read. He had BEV speakers read aloud complex sentences in which the verb read was preceded by a regular verb in the past tense, e.g., passed, liked, looked. By using the pronunciation of reaɪ, Labov was able to assess whether the speaker had understood the inflectional tense signal, even if the -ed ending was not articulated. He found that the -ed ending was interpreted correctly in less than 50% of these sentences, and there was no correlation with subjects' scores on the Metropolitan Reading Test. On the other hand, when time was signaled by an adverbial phrase, such as last month, read was given a past tense reading with a high degree of success, and subjects' scores correlated with their Metropolitan Reading Test scores. In the present study, there is strong evidence that the population of readers who had trouble choosing the appropriate SE past and present inflectional endings also had trouble selecting the time adverbial which is appropriate for the tense of a passage.

For both SE and BEV subjects at all three grade levels, there were different levels of mastery for the tenses, as reflected by scores on the selection of time adverbials. Correct scores were higher for every day than for yesterday, and lowest for tomorrow. Furthermore, the frequency of wrong choices also followed this order, i.e., every day was the most frequent wrong choice, then yesterday, then tomorrow. There are two factors which may be affecting this distribution. First, every day may occur with all three tenses, e.g., I studied ~ study ~ will study every

day. The adverbial task paragraphs were written in ways to constrain such a choice, but if a subject considered only the sentence containing the slot for the time adverbial, the generic choice would have been appropriate for some of them.² For example, every day is a feasible choice for the sentence, "Bill wasted a lot of time _____. It is much less acceptable in the following paragraph:

Bill looked all over the house for his notebook. He searched everywhere. Finally, he discovered it under his bed. Bill wasted a lot of time _____.

It should be noted that if this were the only factor affecting adverbial choice, there would be no reason to expect differential performance by BEV and SE subjects.

A second factor may involve what must be identified and decoded in the verb system for the correct identification of tense. For the present tense, the uninflected form of the verb is the appropriate signal for all persons except the third singular. For the past, the reader must attend to the verbal ending and identify the past tense morpheme. For the future tense, the signal is not carried in the verb itself but in the preceding auxiliary. For the three tenses, the time signal is increasingly removed from the lexical item carrying the semantic content. Given these different loci for the tense, the levels of difficulty found (present > past > future) might have been predicted.

A further advantage of this analysis is that it explains why BEV speakers had more difficulty with this task. Since the -ed ending is

not always realized in their dialect, it would be expected that they would more frequently fail to identify it than would SE speakers and would therefore choose every day more frequently as the suitable time adverbial. Their decoding and comprehension of the verb stem would be more likely to entail a present tense reading.

A relevant facet of BEV which was not examined in this study is the series of phonological rules which results in the virtual elimination of the auxiliary will (see Labov, 1972). This further complicates the identification of tense for the BEV speaker because the future also has a realization as the unmarked verb form. As in the case of the past tense, BEV readers would have less facility in identifying the future tense because the form encoding it is not always present in their dialect.

The results on both the cloze and the adverbial selection tasks show a strong age effect. This was not an unexpected finding. All three grade levels completed the same two easy passages and the same adverbial paragraphs, and the two older grades completed the same difficult cloze passages. Older subjects, with more education, would be expected to do better on such tasks.

A final issue addressed in this study deals with the problem of the incomparability of the SE and BEV groups in terms of general reading ability. It could be argued that the superior performance of the SE group on the verb task was due to superior reading ability rather than

any dialect-related differences. In response to this problem, a series of regression analyses were performed for both the content and verb responses on all three experimental passages. It was expected that if the present results were more attributable to differences in reading ability than to dialect, then dialect would not account for a significant amount of variance in the cloze task scores once the effect of reading ability had been partialled out. Conversely, if the present results were indeed influenced by dialect-related differences, then dialect would account for a significant amount of additional variance after reading ability had been partialled out. The analyses revealed that when the effect of reading ability was removed, dialect accounted for a significant proportion of the variance in the verb scores on all three passages (passage E1, $R^2 = .043$, $p < .01$; passage E2, $R^2 = .136$, $p < .01$, passage H, present tense verbs, $R^2 = .059$, $p < .02$; passage H, past tense verbs, $R^2 = .281$, $p < .01$). Dialect did not account for a significant proportion of the variance on the content word task for either of the easy passages (passage E1, $R^2 = .008$, NS; passage E2, $R^2 = .008$, NS); however, it did for content words in the difficult passage (passage H, $R^2 = .105$, $p < .01$). On the adverbial task, dialect accounted for a significant proportion of the variance in the case of the past and present paragraphs ("yesterday," $R^2 = .04$; $p < .02$; "every day," $R^2 = .04$; $p < .02$). However, it did not in the case of the future ("tomorrow," $R^2 = .01$, NS). These analyses support the claim that dialect was a significant factor in performance on the cloze and adverbial tasks. Furthermore, they show when the content task was easy enough for

a ceiling effect to occur, there was still an effect of dialect for BEV readers in the verb task.

Implications

This study was designed to investigate whether a specific characteristic of BEV--variability in verbal inflections--is related to reading comprehension. Two tasks were used. In the first, subjects completed narratives that had been clozed for content words and verbs. In the second, subjects chose an adverbial for short paragraphs in which time was indicated by verb tense and, to some extent, general semantic content.

The interaction of dialect rating and item type supports the claim that dialect is a source of reading interference for BEV speakers. The difference in performance of the two groups of subjects was greater for the verbal inflections than for the content words, and BEV and SE differ with respect to the former but not the latter. An error analysis of wrong cloze choices provides additional evidence of dialect interference: BEV subjects more frequently selected the uninflected verb form, an acceptable BEV variant, than did SE subjects. Furthermore, BEV subjects had more difficulty than SE subjects did in selecting time adverbials when verb inflections were the principal indicators of time.

While some of the difference in the scores of the two groups was related to differences in reading ability, this study provides clear evidence that dialect interference did occur. The critical question, then, becomes the importance of this interference for comprehension. In the first task, it might be argued that it was of relatively little

importance since content word scores of BEV and SE subjects were not divergent. Rather than indicating failure to comprehend tense, the failure to select the correct SE verb form may have been an indication of inattention to marking it or of conformity to BEV. However, in the second task it appears that BEV interference may have removed one set of indicators of the time of a passage and left readers dependent on discourse clues of which they were unable to take advantage. The results of this task together with the indication from the first task that BEV interference appears to be greater on a more difficult passage suggest that dialect interference may be more significant when a reader faces a task for which he has inadequate skill.

For the teacher in the classroom, it would probably be useful to call the attention of the BEV reader to verb endings as a source of information about the time of a passage. However, it is certainly at least as important to teach BEV readers to make use of semantic and discourse features from which the same information may be inferred. For example, teachers can alert students to the distinction between events which are repetitive ("goes to school") and occur frequently ("every day") and those which are not ("bought a new car," "will paint his room") and occur at points in time ("yesterday," "tomorrow"). It is our belief that teachers will have greater success with their BEV students if they emphasize such semantic and discourse clues, not structural

analysis, in their attempts to teach notions concerning the time of a passage.

This research also has implications for reading comprehension assessment. Those involved in designing cloze tests should bear in mind that if items which vary across dialects are clozed, there will be a bias built into the instrument. By avoiding such items or by accommodating the scoring to such variation, more valid measurement of the non-standard dialect speaker's reading comprehension will be possible.

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Footnotes

¹See W. Wolfram and R. W. Fasold, The study of social dialects in American English (1974), for a discussion of the various positions advanced.

²This would also entail not attending carefully to either the oral or written directions, which stressed the time of each "little story."

Table 1

Mean Proportion of Correct Cloze Responses (Collapsed across Grade)

Arranged by Verb Tense, Passage, Dialect Rating, and Response Type

		Present Tense				Past Tense			
		Easy Passage		Difficult Passage		Easy Passage		Difficult Passage	
Item Type		$\frac{n = 43}{\text{BEV}}$	$\frac{n = 92}{\text{SE}}$	$\frac{n = 28}{\text{BEV}}$	$\frac{n = 54}{\text{SE}}$	$\frac{n = 43}{\text{BEV}}$	$\frac{n = 92}{\text{SE}}$	$\frac{n = 28}{\text{BEV}}$	$\frac{n = 54}{\text{SE}}$
Verb									
$\bar{X}$		.60	.84	.65	.80	.67	.80	.61	.91
SD		.27	.24	.29	.21	.22	.23	.26	.15
Content									
$\bar{X}$		.97	.95	.90	.96	.84	.89	.90	.96
SD		.07	.16	.11	.06	.16	.21	.11	.06

Black English Vernacular

30

33

34

Table 2
Mean Proportion of Correct Adverbial Responses
Arranged by Grade and Dialect Rating

Grade	Adverbs					
	Every Day		Yesterday		Tomorrow	
	<u>X̄</u>	<u>SD</u>	<u>X̄</u>	<u>SD</u>	<u>X̄</u>	<u>SD</u>
Third						
BEV (<u>n</u> = 15)	.80	.19	.72	.20	.64	.22
SE (<u>n</u> = 38)	.88	.22	.79	.25	.75	.23
Sixth						
BEV (<u>n</u> = 19)	.92	.13	.79	.23	.73	.20
SE (<u>n</u> = 26)	.98	.05	.98	.05	.80	.21
Ninth						
BEV (<u>n</u> = 9)	.84	.16	.87	.19	.84	.18
SE (<u>n</u> = 28)	.99	.05	.95	.11	.85	.20

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